



Cooperation, Competition, and Kids

A learn-at-home series for volunteers, parents, coaches, and anyone who works with youth

Adults and Kids Having Fun Together

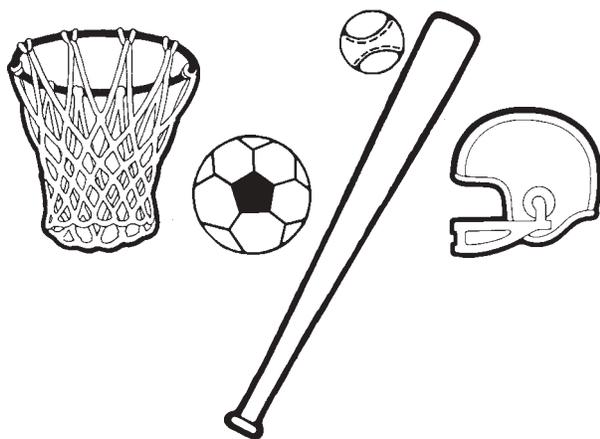
Dear Youth Workers and Parents:

This is the last issue of Cooperation, Competition, and Kids. We hope the series has given you food for thought about competition and its role in your organization. If you would like additional information on youth and competition, please contact the Penn State Cooperative Extension office in your county.

Sincerely,

Blannie E. Bowen

*Blannie E. Bowen, Chair
YPCC*



Kids Just Wanna Have Fun!

In 1988 the Youth Sports Institute surveyed young people ages 10 to 18. It found that about one-third of these kids drop out of sports each year. Most say they left because it was no longer fun! Kids usually rank *having fun* as the number one reason for participating in sports. Winning was cited much farther down the list—number 12.

The behavior and attitudes of parents, coaches, volunteers, and other adults are very important if youth are going to have fun and learn in a competitive situation. It is believed that competition teaches kids how to win and lose, how to treat others fairly, and how to practice good sportsmanship and cooperation.

But children learn values from adults. How can we help children learn to win and lose and have fun while lessening the negative effects of competition? Read the following scenarios to see if you agree with the message the adult may be sending (Danielson, 1993).

- When Nancy returns home from a basketball game, her mother asks, “Did you win?”

(What’s important is scoring more points than the opponent.)

- A coach tells his players they will have to work extra hard in practice tomorrow because their defensive skills were poor even though they won today.

(What’s important is playing the best you can.)

- A coach says to her worst batter: “I’m proud of you. Today you dared to try those batting tips that I’ve been giving you. Yes, you struck out, but your form and swing are so much better. Soon you’ll be hitting that ball!”

(What’s important is never giving up.)

- Sean’s dad asks: “How did you enjoy your game today? What did you learn?”

(What’s important is playing your best and having fun!)

As you work with youth, remember to encourage them to enjoy the activity, and to do their best.

In *Joy and Sadness in Children's Sports* (1978), Rainer Martens outlines what he feels are the responsibilities of all parents whose children are involved in sports:

- Allow youth to decide their own involvement in competitive experiences (parents have a part in the decision, but the ultimate decision must be the young person's);
- Provide a supportive atmosphere for participation;
- Help youth interpret the competitive experience when they fail as well as when they win;
- Help youth develop the attitude that they are responsible for their actions and that they have control over much of their environment;
- Set limits for youth and discipline them;
- Protect youth from adults who do not have the best interests of the young people in mind.

Guidelines for Parents of Children in Sports

The following guidelines, which appeared in *The Physician and Sports Medicine*, are reprinted here by permission. They can be applied to all competitive situations:

- Make sure your children know that, win or lose, you love them and are not disappointed with their performance.
- Be realistic about your child's physical ability.
- Help your child set realistic goals.
- Emphasize improved performance, not winning. Positively reinforce improved skills.
- Don't relive your own athletic past through your child.
- Provide a safe environment for training and competition. This includes proper training methods and use of equipment.
- Control your own emotions at games and events. Don't yell at other players, coaches, or officials.
- Be a cheerleader for your child and the other children on the team.
- Respect your child's coaches. Communicate openly with them. If you disagree with their approaches, discuss it with them.
- Be a positive role model. Enjoy sports yourself. Set your own goals. Live a healthy lifestyle!



A Strategic Plan for Change?

Cooperation, Competition, and Kids raises questions that youth-serving organizations may wish to consider. Examine the programming offered for youth in your organization and think how you would answer the following questions. You may want to answer them along with volunteers who support your organization, or if you're a parent, to bring them up with the leaders of your organization.

First, make a list of activities and events that your organization offers and divide them into two categories: peer competition and goal competition.

- Star the activities and events that result in recognition of or prestige for youth involved. How do you recognize youth involved in each type of competition? Where are you placing your recognition emphasis?
- What percentage of your programming is spent on competitive activities or events?
- If your program is involved in interpersonal (peer) competition, how do you teach and encourage the practice of skills necessary for healthy competition?
- Who are your partners (volunteers, parents, coaches, judges, etc.) who reinforce these skills, and how do you train them to reinforce these skills?
- How does competition help you build skills in cooperation?
- From these questions, what have you learned about your organization and the elements of competition identified in your programs?
- Based on what you know about your organization, consider what you would like your programs to look like in the future.
- What steps will you need to take to get from where you are to where you'd like to be?

—Adapted from “Design and Redesign Programs to Make a Difference,” *Competition, What We Know about Youth and Competition*, Iowa State University, University Extension.

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Written by Claudia Mincemoyer, Youth Program Coordinator.

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